

Sunday December 1st, 2024

Advent I

Luke 21:25-36

“Watch Out!”

I came across an actual classified ad that appeared in the Stanwood/Camano News, in Washington State. It read “Caution! Homeowners between Warm Beach and Stanwood-Daughter will be learning to drive. Use caution after leaving the garage or porch. Farmers advised to place hay bales around barns, farm equipment, and slow-moving livestock. She will be driving white sedan with frightened father aboard.”

I appreciate the father’s sentiments because I know nothing truly prepares you for the experience of your children learning to drive. You promise yourself; you are going to remain calm, but at the end of the drive, your ankle is so sore from pressing that imaginary brake on the passenger side, and your knuckles are white from clenching your fists. Personally, this anxiety was heightened for me, after watching that show on the Discovery Network called “Canada’s Worst Driver.”

I am not sure it is still running, but if you haven’t seen this little gem, I suggest a look, because your kids will seem like experts after watching the people on this program. The reality is that we worry about our kids driving, not so much because of their own level of skill, but because we experienced drivers know that sometimes it’s the other drivers that cause the problem. As Senator Ed Ford stated, “The most dangerous part of the car is the nut that holds the steering wheel.”

The probability of an accident while driving is just one area of life where we can become overwhelmed by anxiety. In our search for safety and security, we examine every opportunity to lessen the risk to body, mind, and soul. It has not always been so, at least to the levels we now employ to keep safe. When I remember back to the lack of safety oversight I, and every other kid of my vintage experienced, compared to now, it’s incredible the changes.

It was not that our parents were negligent, it’s just that everyone behaved the same way. No one foresaw the probabilities of a disaster that might come from our behaviours. For example: when I was a kid, my dad had a big old Ford station wagon, a behemoth on wheels, and on long road trips we played in the back of the car with no thought of a seat belt on. We also rode our bikes all over Brantford, with no helmets, and quite often suspect brakes.

When I played organized hockey, we had poorly constructed helmets, and not until later did face shields become mandatory. While playing road hockey we wore no safety gear at all, and I have the damaged eye to prove it. Inoculations for childhood illnesses, never heard of some of them, we had polio and smallpox, but I had all the great childhood diseases from chicken pox to mumps and measles. Now, a kid gets the sniffles and the ambulance is called. Although after covid I get it.

I had a humorous experience at Scarborough Grace hospital several years ago. My family doctor had referred me to a specialist there.

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I was having some rather sharp pains in a sensitive place on my body, and he feared a serious problem, and so I found myself awaiting an ultrasound in the emergency department, wearing those very revealing hospital gowns. Aren't those gowns flattering?

At the same time, across from me in the waiting room was a young family with a very rambunctious three-year-old. I had no idea why this family was in the waiting room enduring a cranky kid for hours, until the emergency room doctor came to see them. It was then that I overheard the mother say that the child in question had tripped, and hurt his ankle, and the parents were worried that he had broken it.

A very legitimate concern. That is until you saw what was going on while the doctor consulted. All the while, through this interview, the three-year-old with the injured leg, possibly even broken, according to the worried parents, was running around the waiting room at breakneck speed causing all kinds of mischief. Personally, I thought the doctor did very well not to either break out laughing, or yell at the parents for wasting his time.

As a child, I spent hours and hours playing outside, even, horrors of horrors, after dark. Now kids need an armed escort to go to the playground. And then only after sunscreen, and bug spray, are liberally applied, those being two items I never experienced until I was an adult. We knew nothing about West Nile virus, H1N1, and had no experience of sanitizing gel.

Kids today don't know the joy of metal monkey bars, splintered seesaws, baseball without batting helmets, walking to school without mom or dad in tow, and a whole host of other things. Today we have metal detectors in many schools, cannot take a bottle of water on an airplane, and fear our personal information might be compromised by this thing called the internet. Every week some chemicals or some food are declared to cause cancer in mice, and we panic.

Let me humbly suggest that in just one generation we have become a culture dominated by fear. We hang on every detail about how seemingly ordinary things, or events, have caused a friend of a friend, to die in some horrible fashion or get seriously injured. We avoid anything that might, and I stress "might" here, cause us to be sick, or lessen our quality of life.

The media is somewhat to blame for this, but what concerns me personally, is the way all this fear has crushed our spirits for adventure. I know it is true of me that when faced with a new experience, my first inclination is to wonder what can go wrong first, before I consider what can go right. We know the value of being prudent with our safety but somewhere along the way the adventure for life has gone missing.

I was thinking about Jim Carroll this week. Do you remember what happened to him a few years ago? Do you remember him suffering from a broken rib and dislocated shoulder. None of us wants anyone, to get hurt and we prayed for his quick and full healing, but what I was considering is the fact that despite his injury he continued to play hockey.

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I wonder how many people told him on learning his continued activity that he is getting too old for hockey. I do hope Jim's zest for adventure is still operating. I think it is. I watch people on television do all kinds of things I wouldn't be caught dead trying, from bungee jumping to snowboarding.

The point is though that at some point they tried it, probably their first attempt went very wrong, maybe even like Jim's very wrong, but they got up and tried again. Whether or not we should attempt extreme sports activities is not my concern this morning, but rather I think this unwillingness to risk has invaded our spiritual lives on a grand scale. We read the passage before us when Jesus commends us to "avoid the worries of life" and it bounces right off us.

We take Jesus' words to "Watch Out" and think that is an invitation to avoid the world and stay where we are; to play it safe, so to speak. Somehow, we have come to think that being in God's care, and under his Lordship will keep us safe. We like to sing that such sentiments are the reward of our faith, but it's simply not true. Even the most faithful of us have accidents, get sick, have trials, and experience struggles. Bad things do happen to us.

And so, we come to believe that if we don't step into the street ever again, then there is no way we will ever get hit. The problem is though that to get to the other side, we must cross the street. After all, you know why the chicken crossed the road, don't you? Why to show the raccoon it could be done. In terms of God's call to us to cross the street, we instead fear becoming "roadkill". The vision God gives us sounds exciting, but we fear the unseen thing that can mow us down, and so we stay put.

We like safety, comfort, and our habits. When called upon to step out in faith, our spiritual legs are a bit stiff from lack of use. Perhaps that is the time God comes, and he forces our hand, dragging us kicking and screaming into the fray. Erwin McManus (An Unstoppable Force, p. 42) points out something very interesting that happens in Deuteronomy chapter 2. In this passage the Lord says to Moses and his people...

"Set out now and cross the Amon Gorge. See, I have given into your hand Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon, and his country. Begin to take possession of it and engage him in battle. This very day I will begin to put terror and fear of you on all the nations under heaven. They will hear reports of you and will tremble and be in anguish because of you." (Deut. 2:24-25)

McManus points out that this was a defining moment for Israel. This was the battle in which God was going to establish Israel as his people. Through this victory God was going to place the fear of God in all the nations who worshipped false gods. God's instructions were clear, "Go pick a fight, engage them in battle, and today you will have victory." What do you think was Moses' response on behalf of Israel? Well, he sent messengers to Sihon, king of Heshbon, with a message.

"Let us pass through your country.

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We will stay on the main road; we will not turn aside to the right or to the left.  
Sell us food to eat and water to drink for their price in silver.

Only let us pass through on foot...until we cross the Jordan into the land our God is giving us.” (Deut. 2:26-29) It is hard to believe these two passages are from the same incident. Israel’s response to God’s call to go into battle was met with an overture of peace to the enemy. Israel didn’t believe God would keep his word.

While God had big plans for Israel as a world changing influence, Israel wanted to settle for much less. All they cared about was survival. Israel was motivated by fear and not by faith. They asked of Sihon, “Give us food and water and let us pass through”. The bible goes on to say, “But Sihon king of Heshbon refused to let us pass through. For the Lord your God has made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate to give him into your hands, as he has done now.” (Deut. 2:31)

And then it says, “The Lord said to me, ‘See, I have begun to deliver Sihon and his country over to you. Now begin to conquer and possess his land’”. (Deut. 2:31) McManus states that “God’s first choice is to search for a heart that is wholly his and then strongly support it. But many times, that is not the condition of our hearts. Often it is God who forces circumstances upon us in which it becomes necessary for us to rely on God’s goodness.”

Israel’s experience reminds us that the “worries of life” are sometimes the very moments when God is calling us to something greater. When we see the signs of turmoil all around us, like what Luke calls signs in the moon and stars, that is our call to courage and adventure. There is another television show that is built on this sense of courage. It is called “Dragon’s Den” on the CBC.

On this show, average people come before a panel of rich entrepreneurs to pitch their new business idea, or inventions, to try and get some capital to turn their idea into a success. You all know that it takes some fortitude to take something you have poured your whole self into and offer it up before others for scrutiny. But if you don’t try, you never see your dream take off. We say all the time “nothing ventured, nothing gained”. It’s true in business and it’s true also in God’s kingdom.

Recently we all celebrated Remembrance Day. It is hard to imagine anyone not recognizing the significance of November 11<sup>th</sup>, but still the need to remind people is paramount. In France at Vimy Ridge, is that magnificent memorial to the fallen Canadian Soldiers who secured that vital ridge during WWI. I’ve never had the opportunity to go there to see it in person, but I’ve seen it on television, and I confess marveling at the powerful symbolism of this tribute and memorial.

Memorials are important, as are monuments. The church though was never intended to be a memorial or a monument. We should remember what God has done in the past but also remember that God demands we don’t remain in the past.

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Isaiah 43:18-19 records God saying, “Forget the former things, and do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.”

Our experience with God is to be a catalyst to move us into the future. We are not called upon to build monuments but to join a movement. The church was not to become a place of security and comfort, but of risk and adventure. The church was not to become the fortress into which we withdraw every time we are perplexed by roaring seas, turmoil in the nations etc.

The only place God intended us to hide is not in the church but rather in his presence. The church has never been called to run from culture but rather to transform culture. The turmoil we see around us is in Jesus’ view, not a crisis, but rather an opportunity and a sign that the Kingdom of God is drawing near. It is, as Isaiah recorded, “God doing the new thing.”

I am reminded of a verse in Luke 14. Verse 15 tells of a person listening to Jesus’ talk about the wonderful nature of the Kingdom of God and exclaiming, “What a privilege it would be to have a share in the Kingdom of God.” The good news is that you already have been offered a share; a share of the power, the wisdom, the courage and the love that the presence of Christ brings to us.

We are to be alert. We are called to **Watch Out!** Not out of fear. Fear for our own safety or fear of the future but we are called to **Watch Out** for the moving of the Kingdom of God into our midst and the opportunities this represents to all of us. The real horror that Jesus warns us to escape may very well be missing the greatest adventure of life.